

Case 2920***Diemenia atra* Macleay, 1884 (currently *Demansia atra*; Reptilia, Serpentes): proposed conservation of the specific name**

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Abstract. The purpose of this application is to conserve the specific name of *Demansia atra* (Macleay, 1884, [29 November]) for a venomous snake (family ELAPIDAE) from Northern Queensland, Australia. The name is threatened by the synonym *Hoplocephalus vestigiatus* De Vis, 1884 (13 September) which was published two months earlier but remained unused until 1990.

Keywords. Nomenclature; taxonomy; Reptilia; Serpentes; snakes; *Demansia atra*; Northern Queensland.

1. Macleay (1884, p. 549) proposed the name *Diemenia atra* for a new species of black elapid snake from Northern Queensland, Australia. The dates of publication of the *Proceedings of the Linnean Society of New South Wales* were set out by Fletcher (1896); that for vol. 9, part 3, in which Macleay's paper appeared (pp. 548–568) was given as 29 November 1884 (see also Ingram, 1990, p. 23). Boulenger (1896, p. 323) placed Macleay's name with a question mark in the synonymy of *Lycodon olivacea* Gray, 1842, considering the taxon to be a melanistic variant of the latter, now known as *Demansia olivacea*. Worrell (1952, 1963, 1969) also considered *atra* to be a synonym of *D. olivacea*, as did Loveridge (1934, in the combination *Demansia psammophis olivacea*). This taxonomic allocation was followed by most subsequent authors until Cogger & Lindner (1974, pp. 90–93) revived *Demansia atra* as a valid species. The taxon has been regarded as distinct since then.

2. De Vis (1884a, 13 September, p. 5) published a brief description of a snake in a local morning newspaper, *The Brisbane Courier*. The snake, *Hoplocephalus vestigiatus*, was noted as 'the foot-print snake, a name said to be suggested by the fancied resemblance of the white markings upon its back to tracks of feet', a description which is sufficient to make the name available. De Vis also provided (1884b, p. 138) a more detailed description in the *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Queensland*, published sometime after September (see Ingram, 1990, p. 27).

3. The original newspaper article (13 September 1884) was included in a report of a meeting of the Royal Society of Queensland held the previous evening. De Vis himself considered that names published in newspapers were unavailable and (1907, p. 4) referred to 'the rule which strictly requires that a new name shall be announced

in a publication addressed to the scientific world'. (There was in fact no such rule in the 1905 *Règles Internationales* and in Opinion 384 (April 1956) it was confirmed that names were not unavailable by reason of being published in non-scientific periodicals). Abstracts of papers read at meetings of the Royal Society of Queensland and of the Linnean Society of New South Wales were sent as a matter of course and in the public interest for publication in newspapers (see Ingram, 1990, p. 3). In their work on Australian fossil mammals, Mahoney & Ride (1975, p. 6) recorded that 'during the early history of the Australian Colonies, local newspapers played a most important part in the dissemination of scientific knowledge through their detailed reporting of scientific meetings, in much the same role as that played by *Nature* in London and *Zoologischer Anzeiger* in Leipzig — in fact many of the new names published in newspapers in Australia are in abstracts of papers, published in accounts of scientific meetings, and are identical with abstracts published later in scientific serials such as *Abstracts of the Proceedings of the Linnean Society of N.S.W.* and *Zoologischer Anzeiger*. Accordingly, wherever it has been possible for us to interpret a description as being adequate, or a name as published, we have accepted it. If subsequent workers judge that such names are questionably available and would upset established priorities, or, by giving priority to less complete descriptions, remove from type series specimens which would, through their inclusion in later and fuller descriptions, be available for selection as more desirable lectotypes, they should take steps to have such names formally set aside by the International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature rather than introduce instability by merely dismissing them on a subjective basis'.

4. De Vis's (13 September 1884) specific name of *Hoplocephalus vestigiatus* predated that of *Diemenia atra* Macleay, 1884 ([29 November]) by more than two months but was never recognized as valid until it was revived by Ingram (1990). It was placed by Boulenger (1896, p. 335) as a junior synonym of *Hoplocephalus superbus* (Günther, 1858), now *Austrelaps superbus*, where it remained until 1990. The name *vestigiatus* was largely neglected, and was not even mentioned in the revisionary works of Waite (1898), Rooij (1917), Kinghorn (1929), Loveridge (1934) and Worrell (1963). The only uses of *vestigiatus* since its original publication, other than the Queensland Museum type lists of Mack & Gunn (1953) and Covacevich (1971), have been its recent revival by Ingram (1990), followed by Hutchinson (1990) and Covacevich & Couper (1991a, 1991b).

5. On the other hand, the name *Demansia atra* has been used by more than 20 authors in at least 34 publications since 1974. These include Cogger (1978), Longmore (1986, pp. 38, 110), Wilson & Knowles (1988), Gow (1989), Hoser (1989), Ehmann (1992) and Glasby, Ross & Beesley (Eds., 1993). Among these works are the important guides by Cogger (1975 1992) to the herpetofauna of Australia. These works are of virtually universal influence for all sorts of studies on the biology of reptiles and amphibians of Australia, and are standard sources for more general and popular writings.

6. The two syntypes of Macleay's *Demansia atra* are in good condition in the Australian Museum, Sydney (catalogue nos. AMS B5941 and R31920) with known locality data (see Cogger, 1979b, p. 204). In contrast, the holotype of De Vis's *H. vestigiatus* in the Queensland Museum, Brisbane (catalogue no. J206) is not only 'in damaged condition' but is 'from an unknown locality' (see Mack & Gunn, 1953,

p. 61). Covacevich (1971, p. 63) reported the holotype as having no data and being 'faded; neck damaged; shape distorted; most of tail missing'. These differences probably account to a considerable degree for the persistent awareness by herpetologists of the name *atra*, whereas *vestigatus* has been largely ignored.

7. We regard adoption of the name *vestigatus* instead of *atra* for the Northern Queensland snake as an important threat to nomenclatural stability for the following reasons: (1) the long familiarity of herpetologists with the name *atra*, as opposed to the neglect of the name *vestigatus*; (2) the prolific use of the name *atra* vs. little of *vestigatus*; (3) the establishment of *atra* in the most influential compendia of the herpetofauna of Australia; (4) the special desirability of stability in the nomenclature of any venomous snakes (as species of *Demansia* are); and (5) the much better condition of the type material and the better locality data for *atra* as opposed to *vestigatus*.

8. The International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature is accordingly asked:

- (1) to use its plenary powers to suppress the name *vestigatus* De Vis, 1884, as published in the binomen *Hoplocephalus vestigiatus*, for the purposes of the Principle of Priority but not for those of the Principle of Homonymy;
- (2) to place on the Official List of Specific Names in Zoology the name *atra* Macleay, 1884, as published in the binomen *Diemenia atra*;
- (3) to place on the Official Index of Rejected and Invalid Specific Names in Zoology the name *vestigatus* De Vis, 1884, as published in the binomen *Hoplocephalus vestigiatus* and as suppressed in (1) above.

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